



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Drug related deaths - a wider view is necessary

**Citation for published version:**

Robertson, R, Bird, SM & McAuley, A 2019, 'Drug related deaths - a wider view is necessary', *Addiction*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/add.14627>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/add.14627](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.14627)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Addiction

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is the author's peer-reviewed manuscript as accepted for publication.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Robertson James Roy (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8237-816X)  
McAuley Andrew (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-6047-2400)  
Bird Sheila (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-6378-8382)  
Marsden John (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1307-2498)

## **Letter to the editor – Addiction**

### **Drug related deaths - a wider view is necessary**

Dear Sir,

The paper from Stam et. al. (1) and the insightful commentary from Darke (2) resonate with the concerns of others in Europe, the UK and, in particular, Scotland where drug-related deaths continue to be disproportionately high per head of population (3).

Definitions, which vary across jurisdictions, lead to difficulties comparing datasets (4). In addition, there are problems in ascertaining information, including contextual, pertaining to the death (as provided by police, physician, pathologist and/or coroner) and its subsequent assimilation by those coding cause of death. Attempts to standardise and coordinate toxicology and pathological findings across Scotland have helped accuracy.

As Darke suggests, there are additional reasons why deaths due to drugs are under estimated. We would highlight an increasing interest in the problems for older people who continue to use or have used drugs in the past. Examination of the health of this group reveals additional insights (5). Late deaths due to end stage liver disease and hepatocellular carcinoma linked to hepatitis C virus or alcohol-related remain a significant cause of mortality in older people who have used drugs (6). Other deaths contributing to older users' high burden of disease include early lung cancer and respiratory disease in heavy smokers, cardiovascular deaths, violence, trauma, suicide and co-dependency with alcohol.

Record linkage studies and cohort data should be utilised to identify the true impact of drug use and a more realistic assessment of the impact of drug use over time is urgently required (7,8). This might concentrate attention on the importance of early intervention in treatments and screening.

1. Stam N.C., Gerastamoulos D., Pilgrim J.L., Smith K., Moran L., Parsons S. et al. An analysis of issues in the classification and reporting of heroin-related deaths. *Addiction* 2019; 114: 504–12.
2. Darke, S. Commentary on Stam et al. (2019): Drugs, death and statistics *Addiction*, 114, 513–514
3. National Records of Scotland (NRS) Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2017 [WWW Document] URL (2018)

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/add.14627

<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/vital-events/deaths/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland/2017>

4. Millar, T., McAuley, A. EMCDDA assessment of drug-induced death data and contextual information in selected countries. 2017. Available from:

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/4667/Assessment%20of%20drug-induced%20death%20data.pdf>

5. Lu Gao J.Roy Robertson Sheila M.Bird Non drug-related and opioid-specific causes of 3262 deaths in Scotland's methadone-prescription clients, 2009–2015  
Drug and Alcohol Dependence Volume 197, 1 April 2019, Pages 262-270

6. Hepatitis C in the United Kingdom 2018 Report. Public Health England  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/732469/HCV\\_IN\\_THE\\_UK\\_2018\\_UK.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/732469/HCV_IN_THE_UK_2018_UK.pdf)

7. Public Health England. Office for National Statistics. Drug-related deaths "deep dive" into coroners' records 2018. An experimental "deep dive" study investigating deaths related to drug misuse in 2014 and 2015 using available coroners' records.

8. The National Drug Related deaths Report 2018. NHS National Services, Scotland  
<https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Drugs-and-Alcohol-Misuse/Publications/2018-06-12/2018-06-12-NDRDD-Report.pdf>

JRR, SMB, AMcA

Corresponding author;

Roy Robertson,  
Usher Institute,  
Edinburgh University.  
1 Muirhouse Avenue,  
EH4 4PL.  
07814866521  
[Roy.Robertson@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Roy.Robertson@ed.ac.uk).

Sheila M. Bird PhD, MRC Biostatistics Unit, University of Cambridge CB2 0SR and College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, University of Edinburgh EH8 9AG

Andrew McAuley Senior Research Fellow, School of Health & Life Sciences  
Glasgow Caledonian University

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.